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THE FLEXIBILITY OF ESKIMO SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

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The Flexibility of Eskimo Social Organization

BY W.E. WILLMOTT

In a recent paper, Professor Honigman has discussed "flexibility" as one element of the Eastern Arctic Eskimo ethos.[1] He defines flexibility as "a relaxed mode of procedure and tolerant attitudes toward demands of living."[2] He is particularly interested in the ideational implications of this aspect of ethos, the Eskimo's "passive resignation toward disasters" and lack of elaborate theories of causation, which he relates to child-rearing practices that reinforce a flexible approach to the problems of living.

The present paper will amplify this point by giving examples of flexibility in social organization and by discussing its practical and theoretical implications. The material for this paper was gathered during the summer of 1958 at Port Harrison, P.Q., a community on the east coast of Hudson Bay where most of the 340 Eskimos live in small local groups of 30-50 individuals in 6-10 households.[3]

In an article in the *American Anthropologist,* Professor Embree has suggested that "loose integration" is a functional aspect of Thai culture[4]. It is possible to make a similar case in Eskimo culture for the equivalent concept, flexibility. Rigorous life in the Arctic, where subsistence itself is a never-ending challenge to man's ingenuity, demands a high degree of inventiveness and at the same time prevents the establishment of large, permanent local groups where patterns may become formalized and endowed with value.

To say that flexibility is functional does not, of course, explain its presence as a part of Eskimo culture. No attempt is here made to explain its origin, but only to describe and discuss it as it exists today. The following sections will deal with flexibility in the areas of family organization, kinship terminology, community organization, and recreation. The implications of flexibility for the acculturation of the Eskimos to majority Canadian patterns will then be discussed, and the paper will conclude by raising some theoretical questions arising from this concept.

Family Organization

If it is possible to speak of a basic social unit in any society, as Professor Leighton suggests it is,[5] the household is such a unit for the Eastern Eskimo. Most activities of both men and women take place for or in the household. Nevertheless, many of its functions are variously fulfilled for its members by other households in the local group, and even its membership may change from time to time.

A new household may or may not be established by a marriage. Depending on expediency, a newly married couple may live with the parents or either spouse or may build their own snow house or tent. Locality can be described as flexible.

The normal form of marriage is permanent monogamy. This is so, not because of strong moral or ritual circumscriptions that would tend to make marriage a rigid form, but because monogamy is the best adaptation to the cultural-ecological circumstances: a man cannot live without a sewer-cook-bootsoftener, and each woman must have a hunter-trapper. The attempts of

[1] HONIGMANN, John and Irma, "Notes on Great Whale River Ethos," Anthropologica, N.S. Vol. I, 1959, pp. 106-121.
[2] *Ibid.,* p. 119.
[3] The field work was conducted for the Northern Research Coordination Centre, Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources, Government of Canada, Ottawa. I express my thanks also to the McGill-Carnegie Arctic Scholarship Committee, to Mr. Vic Valentine, chief research officer of the NRCC, and to Mr. Asen Balicki of the Anthropology Section, National Museum of Canada, Ottawa, who have discussed with me some parts of this paper.
[4] EMBREE, John F., "Thailand — a Loosely Structured Social System," *American Anthropologist,* Vol. 52 (1950), pp. 181-193.

[5] See in YATSUSHIRO, Toshio, "Economic Development and Culture Dynamics," *The Eastern Anthropolgist,* Vol. 7, no. 1 (Sep-Nov., 1953), Lucknow University, India p. 13.

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the missionaries to make a value of permanent monogamy have not succeeded. This is evidenced by the large number of marriages without benefit of church (almost two-thirds of the 60 couples) and by the other forms of marriage in the area: two polygynous households, two households in which the women provide for the economic needs of several brothers, and two cases where men have sent unsatisfactory mates away and taken new wives, although the first marriage had been in the church in each case. The form of marriage could be described, therefore, as flexible monogamy.

Although the household normally provides for the daily needs of the individual — food, sleep, closing, sexual satisfaction — these needs may be satisfied in any household in the local group. Young boys may sleep in various tents if it is convenient, for instance, and a person may eat as much as he likes anywhere. When the fish are brought in from the nets, everyone around may partake of raw fish. Similarly, prayers involve whoever is in the tent at the time. From the point of view of function, then, the household can be described as a flexible unit.

The household is rendered flexible in membership by the mechanism of adoption, which distributes children between households more equitably than does nature alone. Where infant mortality is high (294 per 1 000 in the past decade) and epidemic and starvation are likely to wipe out several individuals at a time, adoption aids group survival. Death, sterility, or old age need not be reasons in this society for a couple to lack children so long as there are children in the area.

Adoption is much more prevalent among Eskimos than among other Canadians. Of the 175 children under fifteen in the area of study, 28 are adopted, or 16%. In most cases, the child is adopted because the adopting couple want a child rather than because the child does not have a home. Very few of the adoptions are registered with the RCMP, and several of them involve re-adoption by other parents.

If family forms are as flexible as here suggested, one could expect a high degree of variation and a wide range of types.

This is in fact the case, for the 65 households range in size from two to thirteen individuals; 21 include more than one nuclear family, whether paternal relative, another nuclear family, a lodger, or the child of an unmarried daughter.

Kinship Terminology

Eastern Arctic Eskimo kinship terminology is quite specific, distinguishing between affinal and consanguinal, male and female, younger and older, and often between agnate and distaff. For instance, the term for father's brother, *akkak*,[6] is different from the term for father's sister, *attsak*, parent-in-law, *sakiak*, or mother's brother, *angak*. The system of terminology could be described as bifurcate collateral.

But the use of these terms as observed in the field does not stick to their meanings as given by an interpreter. For instance, *ningaut*, daughter's husband, may also be used for cousin's husband. I found nine terms in use between cousins, none of which distinguished anything but sex and relative age. And *akkak*, father's brother, was found in use variously to describe father's brother, father's brother's son, father's sister's son, husband's brother, husband's brother's son, father's sister's husband, and mother's brother's son. Other terms are used with similar flexibility.

In fact, kinship terms appear to be used with little regard for their literal meanings, although these meanings are recognized by the Eskimos as specific. Rather, they are employed as they seem appropriate to the nature of the personal relationship between the two people. If a man looks on an older male cousin as belonging to an older generation, the term *akkak* may seem more appropriate than the literally correct term, *qatanguk*, first cousin.

[6] Eskimo words are spelled according to the orthography developed by Dr. Gilles Lefèbvre of l'Université de Montréal, which may be obtained from the Northern Research Coordination Centre, Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources, Ottawa, Canada.

Kinship terminology is also used between unrelated individuals in the same local group, especially among children. Social relationships are given kinship status in order to cement the local group together. Thus, all children of similar age in a camp may call each other *qatangutik*, a term that was variously described to me as meaning "first cousin," "any relative of the same age," or "someone born in the same camp."

Community Organization

In the area of Port Harrison, there are seven local groups. The largest of these, comprising eighteen households, in located at the "white" settlement, where, according to a rule established by the local RCMP, only those families may settle one of whose members is working for the "whites." The other six local groups are camps from five to fifty miles from the settlement, made up of from six to ten households each.

As far as we can determine, the traditional Eskimo local group was a small, flevible, nomadic band without clearly defined leadership roles, and whose membership varied somewhat from year to year as different families decided to camp together after each summer gathering.[7] This pattern has changed under the impact of varying contact situations. Around Port Harrison there are three quite distinct patterns of community organization today: 1) the organized camp, 2) the loosely conglomerate camp, and 3) the settlement. These can best be described through a historical review of their origin.

With the advent of the fur-trader — about fifty years ago in this area — camps became more stabilized in both membership and location because of the establishment of individual traplines that were maintained from year to year. The trading companies found it efficient to work through one spokesman for each group, and this man's position of leadership was assured by the policy of presenting peterhead boats and whaleboats

[7] HAWKES, E.W., *The Labrador Eskimo*, Mémoir 91 (Anthropological Series No. 14) Geological Survey, Department of Mines, Ottawa, 1916, p. 110. See also WEYER, Edward M. Jr., *The Eskimo, Their Environment and Folkways*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1932 p. 209ff.

to spokesmen in order to assure their loyalty. Since these boats then became the primary means of summer transportation and hunting, the owner controlled the movements of the camp and assumed a position of considerable power. Three of the six camps around Port Harrison have powerful leaders who own large boats, and each has a stable population with a strong feeling of differentiation from the other camps.

As the fur trade declined, many Eskimos moved into the settlement and lived on relief, sharing the food of relatives who were employed. This centripetal tendency, which has been observed throughout the Arctic by students of Eskimos, was brought to a sudden halt in 1957 by a local RCMP (police) order that all Eskimos not employed in the settlement should relocate in camps. This order reduced the Eskimo population of the settlement from 27 households to 13, from about 135 persons to 75. Those who left the settlement moved about five miles away, where they established two loosely organized camps that fragment in winter and come together for early summer. Another camp, whose leader died without logical successor, has also become a loose conglomerate of households. These three camps appear to be the most similar to pre-contact patterns of community organization.

Those households that remain in the settlement itself are held there by the existence of the "white" establishments, not by indigenous community organization. There is no recognized leader of the Eskimo community, although the Hudson's Bay Company interpreter acts as a middleman whenever orders are given or requests received by "whites."

Although private ownership of the tools and product of the hunt was recognized in the traditional band, weapons and tools not in use by their owner could be used by anyone in the band, and food was shared to assure that no one in the band would starve as long as there was supply. These patterns were maintained during the rise of the fur trade, and are still maintained today in regard to the hunt. Wages, however, are not shared, primarily because they are part of a new economic pattern that includes majority Canadian ideas of private property. Also, they are not in a form that can be readily shared, since they are

paid as credits at the Hudson's Bay Company store and turned into goods as the wage-earner requests it. Similarly, earnings from trapping and soapstone carving are not shared but belong to the individual.

Since the camp depends on the hunt for half its food, patterns of sharing make households more interdependent than the households in the settlement, where each lives primarily from wages. Hunting is undertaken by settlement Eskimos only as a supplement to their diet, and sharing is therefore only incidental now to new pattern that is replacing it.

Eskimo community patterns have been able to change several times in a few short decades, each time adapting to the changing economic situation. The existence of several patterns within the same area and within the lifetime of these Eskimos indicates that these patterns are flexible, without strong values attached.

Recreation

What might be considered a trivial example of flexibility, but one that nevertheless makes the point clearly, is recreation. Aside from the traditional forms of recreation, the most important of which is visiting, the Eskimos have adopted various new ones from traders and other agents of civilization. From the point of view of this paper, the interesting thing about these borrowed forms of recreation is that they become less formal and more flexible, although highly structured in their original patterns. Two examples will indicate the de-structuring of games among the Eskimos.[8]

The Eskimos in the camp I studied played cards every night. The women preferred a type of 500 rummy, although the men played five-card games that were entirely new to me. The rules of 500 rummy changed from hand to hand, the person next to the dealer determining the winning score, the wild cards,

[8] A detailed description of Eskimo games and other forms of recreation may be found in my report to the Canadian Government (WILLMOTT, W.E., "An Eskimo Community," Northern Research Coordination Centre, Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources, Ottawa, 1960.

and the number of cards to be dealt on the first hand. On subsequent hands the revolving dealer decided how many cards to deal, depending on her own advantage, so that every hand became a different type of game.

Checkers are played by some Eskimos. As with other gambling games, the rules change after each game, depending on the alternate choice of the two players. Some of the observed variations were: pieces may move only forward but may jump backward as well, kings may move the entire diagonal of the board, kings may jump the entire diagonal of the board, pieces may jump backward only as the second jump of a double jump that has started forward.

Perhaps the best example of a formal pattern of recreation that has been de-structured by the Eskimos is the square dance. Learned originally from whalers and traders, Scots and French-Canadians, the dance has changed to allow any even number of couples instead of the originally prescribed four. Individuals may use a shuffle or a jig-step, and the figures follow each other according to the whim of the lead couple rather than by the original plan of the dance.

Each aspect of Eastern Arctic Eskimo social organization exhibits flexibility. The four examples given here are intended as an illustration of this characteristic, not as proof of the proposition. Its implications to the acculturation of the Eskimos and to social theory remain to be discussed.

Flexibility and Acculturation

There is no doubt that flexibility had much to do with the fact that "white" contact with Eskimos has been relatively free of conflict at Harrison. Since action patterns were not rigid nor heavily value-laden, they could adapt to the changing situation without the Eskimo feeling and overwhelming sense of loss. Changes introduced by "whites" were not viewed as threats to an Eskimo way of life, but rather as a factor of environment to which the Eskimo must adapt with the same approach he has always used in adapting to a hard and capricious physical environment.

The Eskimo's attitude toward the environment is summed up in the word. *"arunamut,"* which literally means, "because nothing can be done," and implies "therefore we must face the situation without regret."[9] Ever since the white man entered the Arctic, the Eskimo has said *"arunamut"* to all his incomprehensible antics. "White" economy, then "white" religion, and finally "white" political authority have penetrated Eskimo society, wrought far-reaching and irrevocable changes on it — often without the understanding of the Eskimos involved. Yet these changes have not been overtly opposed by the Eskimos. Rather, the social organization has adapted to the changes as it would adapt to a natural disaster or an environmental change.

The *arunamut* attitude has resulted in the unfortunate consequence that the Eskimo now accepts as an environmental axiom much that in democratic society is considered an individual's prerogative and duty. For instance, the right to choice of religion, the right to choice of residence, the duty to work, the right to bargain as a free agent, and the right and duty of education for children do not involve individual choice among Eskimos in this area.

But if this flexibility has led to domination of Eskimo society by various white agents, it may also abet the process of acculturation that the Eskimo is still undergoing. For even rapid social change need not produce conflict in a society where behavior patterns do not appear as rigid values, where the social organization is suited to easy adaptation. The problem facing the administrator in such circumstances is not one of gradualism to avoid conflict, but rather the destruction of the relationship with "whites" that involves the acceptance of "white" authority as an incontrolable part of the environment, and the reassertion by the Eskimo of control over the areas of culture that have been in "white" hands. Fundamental in this process will be the realization of economic independence of the Eskimo local group, its ability to act as a free agent in economic matters.

[9] The attitude and word *arunamut* are not new with this research, but have been recorded by many writers. See, for instance, DE COCCOLA, Raymond, and Paul KING, *Ayorama,* Oxford University Press, New York, 1956. The title of this book is derived from the same root in the dialect of the Coppermine Eskimos of the Central Arctic

Theoretical Significance

The flexibility of Eskimo society provides interesting theoretical problems for the anthropologist, which are ultimately of practical importance as well. Firstly, it raises the question of the integration of each social unit in the society. For if patterns of behavior are not standardized as values and defined to include deep emotional content, what produces solidarity and integration in the society, in the local group, or in the family?

The question of family integration is one for particularly fruitful speculation and research by social scientists. The family, or household, is the basic unit of traditional Eskimo society. One would therefore expect it to be highly integrated, with strong interdependence not only on the economic level, but on the personality level as well. But the relative ease with which children are passed from one family to another, and the apparent lack of personality damage to children resulting from even repeated adoptions, indicates that ties between parents and children are easily broken, easily made. This would suggest that neither parent nor child feels an overwhelming sense of unique relationship.

But if this is so, and since we know that personal identity is learned from relationships, how does the child gain his sense of personal identity? How does he learn to understand his status and, consequently, his relationship with other members of the society? It has been assumed by social scientists interested in socialization that this personal identity comes from the unique relationship between parent and child, especially mother and child. Is it possible that personal identity may develop without such a unique relationship that is defined as endowed with extraordinary emotional intensity? These are only premilinary queries that come to mind on what is obviously a highly complex subject.

The question of the integration of the local group provides another area of profitable research for the anthropologist. It seems evident that kinship is not the primary mechanism for integration of the organized camp, but rather the economic cooperation of the households, primarily in the use of a large

boat. These camps appear to persist, however, in places where they have ceased to function as economic units.[10] The historic evolution of the status of leader and its present demise offers an interesting developmental study of status.

Secondly, the relation between flexibility and integration provides interesting theoretical speculation for the functionalist. Flexibility "does not mean that the society is poorly integrated," Embree states:

> On the contrary, the loose integration is a functional one, allowing not only variation in individual behavior, but also in national behaviour. [In Thailand] it had a survival value which may well go back to the early days of extensive Thai migrations and which has served the nation well to this day.[11]

Embree points out that the functionality of flexibility in this case raises the theoretical question of whether it is possible to find a one-to-one correlation between "needs" and structure.[12] Although he does not mention Malinowski, this appears to be a suggestion that Malinowski's functionalism needs restudy in the light of these findings.

Malinowski has stated that function is defined "by showing that human institutions ...are related to primary, that is biological, and derived, that is cultural needs. Function means, therefore, always the satisfaction of a need."[13] By this definition, and by reading Malinowski on acculturation,[14] one gets the impression that in his view, specific needs are satisfied by specific social units, which change under impact from functionally equivalent units in another society.

But in Eskimo society it is often difficult accurately to define the functions (by Malinowski's definition) of any social

[10] Mr. Asen Balikçi reports that at both Great Whale River and Povungnituk Eskimo settlement patterns follow the lines of previously separate camps, which he calls *demes*. ("Relations inter-Ethniques à la Grande Rivière de la Baleine, baie d'Hudson, 1957," (MSS) National Museum of Canada, Ottawa, 1958, p. 23 and *passim*.)

[11] EMBREE, *loc. cit.*, p. 191.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 192.

[13] MALINOWSKI, Bronislas, *A Scientific Theory of Culture*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1944, p. 159.

[14] See, for instance, KABERRY, Phyllis, "Introduction" in MALINOWSKI, *Dynamics of Culture Change*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1945.

unit, for they change in different circumstances. One might go further and suggest that the four-fold description of function proffered by Parsons[15] does not produce fruitful results in a situation where institutions are not clearly defined and their functions vary according to circumstances.

Summary

Eskimo social organization is characterized by what Honigman has called flexibility — a lack of rigidity and value associated with conventional ways of doing things. The flexibility may be seen in family organization, in the loose definition of the form of marriage, in the casualness of adoption, and in the informal approach to functions. It may be seen in the non-literal use of kinship terminology, which emphasizes the personal nature and closeness of the ties between two people rather than their actual kin relationship. It may be seen in the various patterns of community organization and the ease with which one changes into another. And it may be seen in the recreation patterns that become de-structured when practised by the Eskimos.

Flexibility has allowed acculturation to proceed with relative lack of conflict, and it may do so in the future. On the other hand, it produces the problem of lack of control by the Eskimos over many aspects of their society — education, religion, political authority, and especially economic organization — that are today entirely in the hands of "whites."

Finally, the flexibility of Eskimo social organization raises the interesting and researchable theoretical questions of the integration of various social units and the functional approach to institutions of Malinowski and Parsons.

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[15] See, for instance, Talcott PARSONS, and Neil J. SMELSER, *Economy and Society*, The Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois, 1951.

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